

ON OUR OWN TERMS: TRANS WOMEN CRAFTING THE MEANING OF ‘WOMAN’

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Queer AΦ Conference

Patrick Califia: “So there it is: the reason why I am here. Not my daddy’s dick (which is, after all, dispensable), but my need for it. . . . Sucking a dildo is so perverse, evoking a series of emotions and images that ought to be confusing, but that makes perfect sense at the time. I am sorry the instrument that moves in my mouth is not flesh, because then I would be able to give my daddy pleasure beyond the visuals, the way it makes him feel to see me choke, cry, and struggle to expand my physical capacities to accept him. I am also (more selfishly) sorry because a real cock would come long before my daddy will get tired of this game and withdraw. Then I would be off the hook.

“ . . . Then there is the point in time where I lose awareness of my daddy’s gender, or even my own. It is an infantile state. I am sucking, and this is what I must do to live. It is all that life is.”¹

Mira Bellwether, *Fucking Trans Women*: “More than one of my lovers, in fact basically all of them, has at one time or another lamented that there’s no ‘instruction manual’ for my body. . . . I can sympathize. I’ve had to learn all kinds of stuff about my body on the fly that I would rather *not* have learned the hard way. I’ve had to invent words, metaphors, and stories, to explain to myself and to others how I think my body works, and what it can do.”²

Trans meaning crafting: The creative, collaborative practice by which trans people construct interpretations of our bodies that make genuine sense of who we are and how our bodies work on our own terms.

My overall project: I offer an account of the metaphysics, epistemology, politics, and law of gender that begins with lived trans experiences from the ground up (*radical trans feminism*) rather than tries but struggles to retrofit trans lives into existing cis-centric frameworks and institutions (*trans-inclusive feminism*).³

This talk: I introduce an analysis of trans meaning crafting as trans feminist metaphysics of gender—a *sexy mad scientist metaphysics* on the model of inference to the best explanation.

I’m interested in articulating an empirical and explanatory—not merely moral and political—basis of trans people’s lived genders: how trans people do gender is *constitutive* of gender reality, which then acts as a demanding desideratum on our theory.

I. TRANS MEANING CRAFTING AS SEXY MAD SCIENTIST METAPHYSICS

Bellwether: “There are a few principles at the heart of this zine. One of them is that we benefit from sharing knowledge. Another is that the form of someone’s body doesn’t necessarily determine what that body means, how it works, or what it can do. That is to say that just because what’s in my crotch *looks* like a penis doesn’t necessarily mean that it *works* like a penis. In point of fact it doesn’t, at least not most of the time.” (*FTW*, p. 2, my emphasis)

“Failure to hear me on that can have some pretty significant negative consequences; I dam up, I cross my arms. Being asked to fuck someone with my penis as a cock generally puts me off, and

1. Patrick Califia, “Daddy,” in *Melting Point: Short Stories* (Boston, MA: Alyson, 1993), p. 67.

2. Mira Bellwether, “Introduction: ‘Why Fucking Trans Women?’,” *Fucking Trans Women*, no. 0 (October 2010), p. 2 (her emphasis), <http://fuckingtranswomen.org>.

3. Ding, “Pregnant Persons as a Gender Category: A Trans Feminist Analysis of Pregnancy Discrimination,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 50, no. 3 (Spring 2025): pp. 737, 755.

sometimes enough that I get angry or upset. I don't understand the desire. Or I do, but I'm defiant: why ask for the smaller, unreliable, and most importantly *uncooperative* cock when there are plenty of dildos available? When I try to force the issue on my penis she is even more defiant: she basically crosses her arms as well, and things get difficult and annoying." (FTW, p. 34, my emphasis)

"I knew early on that while I was into fucking someone with a cock, my penis was only into occasional cock-being. The rest of the time it would rather be a clit, and for the most part that's how I treat her. She likes to be sucked, rubbed, all of the usual things. Really the only difference is size, the hole at the tip, and every so often she wants to get into penis-drag and fuck someone's mouth, cunt, or asshole. In that way, we're well-matched: I also enjoy occasional boy-drag. I think for both my penis and myself, the part that feels gross is the coercive *assumption* that because we look like we do, we should want to behave masculinely all of the time." (FTW, p. 33, my emphasis)

Ana Valens: "Our society thinks a penis is inherently masculine, penetrative, and male. That isn't true. Just because a girl has a dick doesn't mean she's going to insert it into something. It's better to think about trans women's dicks as *women's* genitals. A cis man will have a very different relationship with his junk than a trans woman on HRT." (her emphasis)⁴

"The word 'girdick' also reminds me of how estrogen feminizes trans women's penises. For instance, while penises exposed to testosterone are coarser and easily become erect, estrogen makes the penis' skin thinner, softer, and more sensitive. It tastes and smells different. . . .

"But there are more choices! Outside of 'girdick,' 'clit,' and 'outie,' there's a long list of words that non-op trans girls draw on to describe their privates, including gender-neutral terms like 'strapless' and 'junk.' On the other hand, some trans women love using 'dick' and 'cock,' which is perfectly fine too."⁵

Jacob Hale: "So, when Powersurge defined a woman as someone who could slam her dick into a drawer without hurting it, a common response among some butch leatherdykes and some ftms was to say that it sure would hurt if their dicks got slammed into a drawer; a dildo may not be a dick only in the conception, it may be a dick *phenomenologically* as well."⁶

My claim: Trans people's own interpretations of our bodies are *metaphysically* privileged for the straightforward reason that they best explain gender reality as we live it.

Bellwether: "I also believe that one of the best tools we have at our disposal for figuring out our bodies, for learning about them and coming to delight in them, is experience. . . . I'm talking about *starting from data and working toward conclusions* rather than the opposite; something very much like sexy mad science (with lab coats and leather gloves optional)." (FTW, p. 2, my emphasis)

"Let the metaphors, the language, the analogies come afterward. They are helpful, but I believe with great conviction that what I have between my legs is not a metaphor or an analogy but something new and wonderful. Best to begin from the beautiful explosive moments of pleasure and discovery, and to let the rest come after." (FTW, p. 3)

The IBE account of trans meaning crafting: By failing to take trans meaning crafting seriously, the philosophical literature has missed out on just how many more empirical data points about gender we in fact have, and what they can do and mean for trans people—important aspects of empirical reality are best explained by interpretations invented and reinvented by trans people on our own terms.

4. Ana Valens, "Trans/Sex: Here's What You Need to Know before Having Sex with a Trans Woman," *Cashmere*, March 22, 2019, <https://cashmeremag.com/trans-sex-myths-sex-552811>.

5. Ana Valens, "Trans/Sex: From 'Girdick' to 'Clit,' What Trans Women Call Their Genitalia," *Cashmere*, December 26, 2018, <https://cashmeremag.com/trans-sex-genitalia-girdick-505208>.

6. C. Jacob Hale, "Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex without Women or Men," *Social Text* 15, nos. 3–4 (Winter 1997): p. 230 (my emphasis).

If interpreting a certain body part as a penis fails to fit and illuminate the relevant experiential data—including not just how a trans woman receives the ways in which others see and treat her, but also how she relates to her own body on her own terms—then that body part *is* not a penis, in the deeply empirical, old-school material radical feminist sense of ‘is.’

Bellwether: “In this issue of the zine I am definitely going to be talking a lot about penises, and I am going to be using the word penis to talk about them. This is a *decision*, not an assumption or a given, so I want to say a few words about how and why I made it. Basically I needed a word to directly identify the sensitive, fleshy tube of flesh with all the nerves and blood vessels in it . . . not because I believe that’s the *right* word for it. . . .

“Am I telling you that your body has a penis attached to it? No. . . . I made the choice to use the word penis because it’s the word that most of us will recognize and understand, even if we only need to use it so that we can *replace it with a better one for our own bodies*.” (FTW, p. 14, my emphasis)

△ An account of trans meaning crafting along these lines does *not* imply that there are thus universally correct interpretations of specific body parts; indeed, the fact that trans people interpret our bodies in beautifully varied ways is a data point that favors modeling trans meaning crafting on IBE.

Bellwether: “I would never tell another trans woman how to feel about her genitalia, I think I do want to invite anyone reading this, trans woman or otherwise, to try listening to the body more closely. It may be the case that your parts are telling you that they need to change in order to give you pleasure, or it may be the case that they are telling you things that you haven’t paid close enough attention to hear. I hope that whatever is going on, you find your own strategies for working *with* your body rather than *against* it whenever it’s possible. After all, it’s rude to ignore a lady.” (FTW, p. 34, my emphasis)

II. FROM BODILY INTERPRETATION TO GENDER INTERPRETATION

Julia Serano: “I latched onto all sorts of other gender identities and theories that seemed to hold potential explanations for my subconscious feelings [of my body as female]. For quite a while, I thought of myself as a crossdresser and viewed my female subconscious sex as a ‘feminine side’ that was trying to get out. But after years of crossdressing, I eventually lost interest in it, realizing that my desire to be female had nothing to do with clothing or femininity per se.”⁷

“I gravitated toward genderqueer identities for most of the years . . . because they resonated with the myriad of gendered experiences that I had had up to that point. They captured the fact that, at the time, I really did feel like I was straddling both maleness and femaleness in some way.

“My identity as a woman grew out of positive experiences, such as feeling comfortable with my own female body. Yet it also arose out of negative ones. . . . My identity as a woman grew out of my frustration over being called a ‘bitch’ any time I stood up for myself, or having others make remarks about my hormone levels any time I became legitimately upset or angry about something. . . . My identity evolved out of a million tiny social exchanges where others made it very clear to me that my status in the world—my class, if you will—was that of a woman and not a man.”⁸

The building brick theory of gender: Gender is the meanings that *we* make out of the relevant concrete material, personal, relational, social, political, and historical situations socially given to us, on an analogy to building with Legos; our genders just are *whatever* may turn out to best explain gender reality as we live and interpret it, which we in turn figure out by inference to the best explanation.

The IBE/Lego view distinctively makes sense of: (1) Trial and error; (2) genuine confusion/mistake; (3) felt sense of discovery; (4) retrospective recognition; and (5) felt explanatory power.

7. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal, 2007), p. 84.

8. Serano, pp. 221–22.

III. REAL “REAL TALK” ON THE METAPHYSICS OF GENDER

Gender from the ground up: For me, a trans feminist theory of gender is characteristically *bottom-up*—from experience to theory, and from margin to center.

- a) *Gender-first*: Gender is explanatorily prior to gender identity (**Euthyphro’s gender trouble**).

Jennifer Saul: “Trans women take their claims of womanhood to be *substantive*, rather than merely claims about what sentences they’re disposed to accept. They think that when they begin to self-identify as women this is made true by their womanhood, rather than the other way around.”⁹

- b) *Metaphysics-first*: Trans meaning crafting is a heavyduty metaphysics of gender.

Katharine Jenkins: “The upshot of all of this is that the Ontology-First Approach”—according to which disagreements over who is a woman “should be settled by establishing what gender kinds are really like”—“is liable to entrench the oppression of trans people *even when it is being used by those who support trans-inclusive social practices*.”¹⁰

Mari Mikkola: “I contend, by contrast, that *nothing* hangs politically on providing a substantive account of gender that elucidates the applicability conditions of woman. The thin conceptualization advanced here can do the required feminist work.”¹¹

I think that if our understanding of the required feminist work included a need to make sense of *gender as trans people do it on trans people’s own terms*—rather than as glimpsed from the standpoint of a cis-centric (even if trans-inclusive!) feminism—we may have a very different answer as to just how much hangs politically on providing a substantive account of gender indeed.

- c) *Trans-first*: A trans feminist theory of gender seeks a story told by trans people to other trans people for each other on our own terms, without taking cis people’s genders for granted.

Talia Bettcher: “[T]here must be at least two sets of [gender] concepts in play—the ones that are given in dominant socio-linguistic practices, and the ones that are given in resistant socio-linguistic practices. . . . [The latter] inarguably departs significantly from dominant socio-linguistic practice. Indeed, it’s *such* a significant departure that we must surely speak of two sets of concepts/meanings rather than one.”¹²

“There is a genuine dispute concerning two competing visions of gender.”¹³

Insofar as the subaltern meaning crafted by trans people exposes the dominant meaning as a pretext for social domination only cleverly disguised as biology, positioning the dominant and subaltern meanings as ontological equals denies trans people a *metaphysical* basis for rejecting the dominant meaning when such a metaphysical basis is readily available to us via explanatory power.

Michelle Tea: “I believe that sex and writing can save people, especially queer people, because it shoots our lives up with hot, crucial meaning and gives us the power to create and recreate that meaning, even after the girl is gone and your heart is broken and your sheets are ruined forever.”¹⁴

9. Jennifer Saul, “Politically Significant Terms and Philosophy of Language,” in *Out from the Shadows: Analytical Feminist Contributions to Traditional Philosophy*, ed. Sharon L. Crasnow and Anita M. Superson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 206 (my emphasis).

10. Katharine Jenkins, *Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 215 (her emphasis).

11. Mari Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice: Dehumanization and its Role in Feminist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 115 (my emphasis).

12. Talia Mae Bettcher, “Through the Looking Glass: Trans Theory Meets Feminist Philosophy,” in *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader, and Alison Stone (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 397 (her emphasis).

13. Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trans Women and the Meaning of ‘Woman,’” in *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, 6th ed., ed. Nicholas Power, Raja Halwani, and Alan Soble (New York: Rowman & Littlefield), p. 242 (my emphasis).

14. Michelle Tea, “Introduction,” in *Best Lesbian Erotica 2004*, ed. Tristan Taormino (San Francisco: Cleis, 2004), p. xiii.